

# ***The Liberating Possibilities of Queer Social Activism in Mainland China***

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(updated 25 october 2011)

## **Introduction**

This paper presents some thoughts on *tongzhi* - or ‘queer’ - social activism in post-millennial urban China, in the context of globally travelling queer and feminist theory and practice. While LGBT social movements around the world share the broad aim of achieving social acceptance and liberation for sexual and gender minorities, locally specific strategies, interpretations, and priorities may often differ substantially from each other. In critical interdisciplinary scholarship on transnational sexualities and gender diversity, there is a growing focus on the limited ability of western models to accurately convey non-western practices and priorities. This limitation is reflected in the ways that the quest for LGBT equality and liberation is often interpreted as a question of identity politics, whereby sexuality is reduced to a process of individual self discovery and journey toward self-acceptance and personal identity such as gay, lesbian, bisexual, trans, or queer. This model is in turn fuelled by a powerful rhetoric of pride and visibility (or: ‘being/coming out’), which is positioned as the moral opposite to its negative counterpart: shame, being in denial, closeted and silent (see Decena 2008).

Pride festivals and parades are emblematic in this respect. The measure with which societies now are considered ‘gay friendly’ and ‘homo-tolerant’ is the presence or absence of annual pride festivals and parades in urban centres, and the relative censorship by (religious) traditionalists or political government. Recent clashes at pride marches in Moscow, Belgrade, Split, and Zagreb, for example - just to cite examples ‘close to home’ - demonstrate the constant precariousness of LGBT equality, and goes to show that LGBT issues remain an urgent political

issue and not just a matter of apolitical celebration and consumerist entertainment. Similarly, the anti-homosexuality rhetoric of some African national leaders such as in Uganda and Zimbabwe, demonstrates that the problem with ‘queer’ is not same-sex desire and practice as such, but rather manifestations of it that are considered western and therefore culturally alien and morally inappropriate - namely identity politics and rights activism in the public sphere.

### **‘Queer China’**

Against this background, I will suggest that it is pertinent to pay attention to the cultural specific but also globally resonant practices of queer social movements in Mainland China. This is important for at least two reasons. First, scholarship to date on transnational sexualities and gender diversity has concerned itself mainly with cultural locations where homosexuality has been legally outlawed or violently persecuted, such as the places I have just mentioned, or with queer diaspora linked to the United States, exemplified by anthropologist Martin Manalansan’s study of Filipino gay men in New York City (2003).

Second, ‘China’ as a cultural and theoretical concept is important to the wider analysis. In a recent article by Petrus Liu titled “Why does queer theory need China?” (Liu 2010), he argues that Anglo-American queer theory typically sees China as a relevant concern, “only as the producer of differences from Western queer theory” (Liu 2010: 297). The referent of Chinese specificity, he suggests, often works to establish China as existing in the past, lagging behind in queer developmental progress, or to place China as exceptional, and therefore categorically outside of, and hence irrelevant to, queer theory proper. In this way, a ‘Queer China’ focus adds local knowledge to the body of transnational queer studies and politics, and complicates simplistic theories and politics of LGBT pride and liberation more generally. In turn, the aim

is to contribute to producing alternative, less Eurocentric, political models and theoretical frameworks for sexual and gender cultures worldwide.

Recent years have seen queer communities and social activist groups establish themselves in parts of Chinese mainstream society to an extent that is unprecedented. The public popular reception has also been marked by increasing tolerance and understanding. It is not long ago that the only discourse permitted and available was one that categorically defined homosexuality (*tongxinglian*) as a phenomenon invariably labeled a mental illness, foreign decadent impulse, or at least, as a moral crime.

Although *tongzhi* practices and discourses emerge in a uniquely local Chinese context, they are at the same time influenced by global flows of queer discourse, politics and theory. For the purpose of this short paper, I will explore some key factors in *tongzhi* discourse and politics by way of considering two key concepts - namely ‘pride’ and ‘public visibility’.

When considering pride and visibility in the context of queer social movements, the dominant focus tends to be on direct and explicit protest, and especially Pride marches or parades, as I mentioned. For reasons less to do with homosexuality and more to do with a broad set of political and social imperatives throughout Chinese history, it is impossible for any group of people to freely conduct celebratory parades or gather in larger groups. But this does not mean that *tongzhi* pride and communities are invisible or non-existent. As you will see more examples of in this ‘Queer China’ panel, and the films which will be screened later, major cities in China celebrate pride festivals, parties, and engage in elaborate social activist practices. The tireless efforts of the organizers, some of whom are here today, with the aid of social media and the Internet, make sure that *tongzhi* films and culture reach across China and worldwide. There is, therefore, nothing silent or closeted about *tongzhi* social movements and cultures on

the mainland today. In the remainder of the paper I will briefly outline some alternative ways of defining and interpreting queer social activism by way of re-thinking the concept of pride and visibility.

First, the main focus should not simply be on the celebratory spectacle, protest, and interruption of normalcy and public order. The larger question is: what counts as effective communication within and beyond the movement? In some Eastern European cities, such as Belgrade and Zagreb, for example, queer activists have questioned the use of pride marches given the extreme violence suffered at the hands of government-supported anti-gay groups.

### **Public visibility**

The importance of visibility in the context of queer liberation practices is not simply to do with self-presentation, but equally important, it is about communication. While urban space has been an important site for same-sex practices for a long time, in China as elsewhere, the spatial location and symbolic meaning of the city has taken on a particular significance in facilitating the emergence of a self-identified and visible queer sub-culture since the mid-1990s. The period since the turn of the millennium in particular, has seen a formidable surge in *tongzhi* visibility in Chinese public life, in ways that by and large seek to engage in dialogue and bridge-building with the mainstream society, not protest and demonstration.

This presence and visibility of homosexuality, and of women and men who personally identify with it, is not a straightforward story about growing acceptance of homosexuality as society modernizes. Rather, it appears to be part of a bigger process of greater tolerance for minorities in post-Mao Chinese society. Indeed, a central discursive component of the post-Mao ‘reform and opening’ policies since the late 1970s has been to emphasize the need for

a greater understanding of minorities, to help them develop and thereby gain equal status in a progressive, modernizing China. While this discourse has typically been applied to the perceived ‘backwards’ ethnic minorities in out-of-the-way places, it could be argued that a similar logic also shapes the growing mainstream acceptance of homosexuality. It seems clear, then, that homosexuality is increasingly understood less in terms of the pre-existing medico-scientific paradigm emphasizing individual mental illness or anti-Chinese moral deviance, and is rather perceived as a sub-cultural minority population, and a crucial part of modern progressive society and cosmopolitan lifestyle.

Furthermore, *tongzhi* social activism cannot be understood within rigid binary paradigms such as repression and liberation, normalization and transgression. Rather, the increasingly tolerant discourses on homosexuality take place in a wider context of working out China’s national modernity and its geo-political future by way of determining the ingredients of respectable citizenship and desirable Chineseness. In her recent work on ‘money boys’ (or hustlers) in Beijing, anthropologist Lisa Rofel argues that desire is a crucial realm for producing proper citizen-subjects and respectable ‘gayness,’ defined by appropriate class embodiment and gender sensibility, a proper balance between familial dependency and individualism, as well as between preservation of aspects of Chinese cultural tradition and a newly developed neoliberal cosmopolitanism that transcend nation-state boundaries (Rofel 2010: 427). It is in this context that queer social activism has established itself in urban space and popular discourse. Queerness, therefore, must be understood accordingly not only as a matter of personal self expression, identity politics, and ‘coming out’, but also in terms of a broader social process of producing proper and desirable Chinese citizens (see Berry 2001).

## Pride

While dominant Pride discourses are undeniably powerful in their advocacy of liberation, openness and equality, ‘pride’ is appropriated quite differently across global queer cultures. In some ways, Chinese queer activist networks are advocating pride and equality in ways that resonate with established LGBT rights discourse in the Euro-American world. For example, there is the appropriated symbolism of the rainbow flag, Stonewall references, the use of pink triangles, pride rhetoric – all this seems resonate familiarly with the politics and lifestyles of western LGBT movements.

One of the organizers of the Shanghai Pride festival (*shanghai jiao'ao jie*), an event that first emerged in 2009 and celebrates its third festival this October, explained to me that in his view, a Gay Pride Festival means:

“[It] should be multi-dimensional, multi-day, it should cut across various spheres: celebration, education, arts/cultural, sports, etc, and most of all, it should be an opportunity for a \*collective coming out\* for the LGBT community as a whole. This \*coming out\* element is a key crucial element -- if I and my friends waved rainbow flags in the privacy of our own homes, that would not be pride. if we organised a one-off hush-hush event at some back alley local bar preaching to the converted (as has been done many times before), that would not be pride. If we organised a pride event that is not out in the press, and not known to anyone else in the world but the local gay community, that would not be pride...” (Kenneth Tan, email communication October 26, 2010)

As Shanghai Pride and other Chinese *tongzhi* social activist events have exemplified, it is quite possible to engage in celebration and communication quite openly and publicly beyond direct speech acts and parades that occupies normative city space in a confrontational manner. In

this context, it makes more sense to view *tongzhi* festivals and events less as transgressive protest or counter-cultures than as strategic ways to participate in wider processes of contemporary, globalizing transformations. The emergent *tongzhi* public cultures then, do not so much rest on a categorically visible and explicit mode of participation. Instead, by appealing to shared “normal” and “human” status as Chinese citizens, *tongzhi* expressions of sexual difference perform a process of belonging to not simply, or primarily gay identity but desirable Chineseness. In turn, this strategy helps develop positive self identity within *tongzhi* communities and for tacit and nuanced expressions of same-sex desires in public space that are less likely to evoke political repercussions by authorities. To simply label this process as assimilationist, or a normalizing strategy, a version of the non-western, un-democratic ‘closet’, misses the point because it reduces a complex process to a known paradigmatic binary (see Browne 2006).

On a related note, parts of feminist theory and lesbian anthropology have critiqued the way in which Eurocentric queer theory has valorized an abstract concept of ‘the public’ by implicitly allowing a continued public/private binary where the public is the space of valuable work and pride. It is further defined by masculine, if not masculinist, qualities such as direct confrontation, direct speech acts and unambiguous visibility of sexual difference. Implicitly, those spaces which are not equally visible, direct, and oppositional are relegated to the feminized private, and therefore, less valuable to the business of queer activism. In the context of *tongzhi* social movements, then, it becomes clear that this public/private split re-produces a hegemonic western version of LGBT politics and disregards the nuance of public participation and spatial occupation in various cultural locations.

I would like to briefly refer to the example of the Beijing Queer Film Festival (BJQFF) in order

to further explain the point I am trying to make. During its 10 years of existence the BJQFF has encountered harsh, continuous restrictions by the authorities, which has necessitated finding creative strategies in turn. You will hear more details in other presentations on this panel, as well the movie screenings later, so I will only mention some key characteristics of the festival organizing. They are defined by tacit, ad hoc strategies, extensive use of online and social media, and appropriation of urban space that is least likely to be interpreted by authorities as a politically motivated occupation.

This year the authorities declared the festival illegal and ordered the organizers to cancel the event; they also warned of harsh consequences if the festival went ahead. Organizers refused to be silenced, because they considered the festival an important way “to question and challenge mainstream culture” (Cui Zi’en, 2011) and provide alternative discourses about sexuality and gender.

In response to official intimidation, then, the organizers gave the outward impression that the festival was indeed cancelled, and notified only registered attendees of program and venue via cell phone messaging. They also held events at multiple, smaller venues throughout the city instead of only one central location that could be easily targeted by police. As a consequence of this much *less* public and much *more* internal community based event, fewer people attended the festival. However, the aftermath of the festival has seen the organizers and their allies very effectively publishing and circulating written accounts, online reports, and video clips from the festival in both Chinese and English languages, to media and activist communities globally.

### **Concluding remarks**

*Tongzhi* events such as the BJQFF and Shanghai Pride intervene and interrupt dominant cultural

and political representation of sexual and gender minorities in mainland China. On a local level, these events help push queer voices up from the underground; they help instil self-respect and pride in those who directly identify with *tongzhi* subjectivity, and they also present knowledge of non-normative sexuality to the general population. On a global and theoretical level, the strategic communication of queerness, self-respect and pride in China trouble hegemonic gender and sexuality theory and LGBT politics. This is why it is so important to thoroughly investigate minority social movements across the world in their particular context and expression, interrogate divergent appropriations of globally travelling notions such as ‘gay rights’, ‘pride’ and ‘visibility’, and, most importantly: to take seriously local strategies and priorities, in the various ways they will resemble but also divert from hegemonic western models.

It remains true that *tongzhi* public participation remain dependent on compliant – some would say assimilationist – strategies, at least on (sur)face level. Some observers believe LGBT people are deprived and repressed because pride marches are politically impossible. Yet, the self-affirmative, and tacitly political strategies embedded in *tongzhi* social activism are significant. Despite a general absence of confrontational political rhetoric and with a strategic emphasis on shared humanity, queer public visibility and participation utilize nuanced modes of articulation. These communicative strategies convey messages of difference and sameness, transgression and compliance, depending on the perspectives of the audiences. In this way, they contribute toward a powerful and complex discourse of what it means to be Chinese and *tongzhi* today.

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